

Message Text

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INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15

USIA-06 SAJ-01 OMB-01 TRSE-00 EB-07 /068 W

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P R 121935Z MAR 76

FM AMEMBASSY LONDON

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INFO AMEMBASSY BONN

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LONDON 03988

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PGOV, PINT, UK

SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT WINS VOTE OF CONFIDENCE

REF: LONDON 3842

SUMMARY - LABOR GOVERNMENT MARCH 11 WON ITS FIRST VOTE OF
CONFIDENCE BY SOLID 17 VOTE MAJORITY AFTER RAUCOUS, DIS-
ORDERLY DEBATE WHICH FEATURED PRIME MINISTER WILSON AND
CHANCELLOR HEALEY DIRECTING MOST OF THEIR SALVOS AT DIS-
SIDENT LABOR BACKBENCHERS. BOTH WILSON AND HEALEY MADE
IT CLEAR THAT GOVERNMENT IS NOT DISPOSED TO REVISE ITS
PLANNED CUTS IN EXPENDITURE PROGRAMS IN ANY SIGNIFICANT
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WAY, THOUGH POSSIBILITY OF READJUSTMENTS WITHIN CURRENTLY

PROPOSED GLOBAL SUMS CANNOT BE DISCOUNTED. CONSERVATIVE LEADER THATCHER DIRECTED HER FIRE AT DIVISION IN LABOR RANKS OVER ECONOMIC POLICY IN WHAT WAS POSSIBLY HER BEST YET PERFORMANCE AS LEADER. WHILE OUTCOME WAS AS EXPECTED AND REPRESENTS VINDICATION OF GOVERNMENT AND ITS ECONOMIC POLICY, ENTIRE EPISODE HAS WEAKENED GOVERNMENT AND LEFT DEEP WOUNDS IN PARLIAMENTARY LABOR PARTY (PLP) UPON WHICH WILSON IS ULTIMATELY DEPENDENT. CONVERSELY, CONSERVATIVES HAVE BEEN GIVEN PSYCHOLOGICAL BOOST. WE DO NOT, HOWEVER, BELIEVE END OF LABOR GOVERNMENT IS IN SIGHT, AS HAS BEEN SUGGESTED BY SOME OBSERVERS. END SUMMARY.

1. GOVERNMENT MARCH 11 USED PROCEDURAL ADJOURNMENT MOTION TO SEEK VOTE OF CONFIDENCE WHICH, AFTER DISORDERLY AND OFTEN BITTER DEBATE, IT WON BY MAJORITY OF 297 TO 280. FEAR THAT UNCERTAINTY ABOUT GOVERNMENT AND ITS ECONOMIC POLICIES MIGHT INTENSIFY PRESSURES ON THE POUND CAUSED CABINET TO OPT FOR IMMEDIATE INTRODUCTION OF PROCEDURAL MOTION RATHER THAN FORMAL MOTION OF CONFIDENCE WHICH COULD NOT HAVE BEEN INTRODUCED BEFORE FRIDAY, MARCH 12 (FRIDAY SESSIONS ARE TRADITIONALLY DEVOTED TO PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS AND POORLY ATTENDED). ONCE THIS DECISION WAS TAKEN, CHIEF WHIP BOB MELLISH CALLED SPECIAL MEETING OF PLP, READ THE RIOT ACT TO DISSENTING MEMBERS OF TRIBUNE GROUP, WHO HAD ALREADY INDICATED THEIR INTENTION TO SUPPORT GOVERNMENT ON CONFIDENCE MOTION, AND STRESSED THAT FAILURE TO BACK GOVERNMENT WOULD TRIGGER GENERAL ELECTION. TO DISCIPLINE DISSIDENTS, THREE TRIBUNITES WHO SERVED AS PRIVATE SECRETARIES TO CABINET MINISTERS AND VOTED AGAINST GOVERNMENT WERE TOLD TO RESIGN OR BE SACKED. AT LEAST ONE LABOR MP WAS SUMMONED FROM HOSPITAL TO COMMONS FOR FINAL VOTE.

2. DEBATE WAS LED OFF BY PRIME MINISTER WHO SCATHINGLY ATTACKED HIS PARTY'S ERRANT LEFTISTS, ACCUSING THEM OF SIDING WITH THE TORIES AND LABELLING THIS ALLIANCE, IN A CLEAR REFERENCE TO THE OPPOSITION LEADER'S DRESS "ARSENIC AND RED CHIFFON." IT WAS NOT ONE OF WILSON'S BETTER PERFORMANCES AND CONTRASTED STARKLY WITH THAT OF THATCHER WHOM MANY OBSERVERS FELT HAD HER BEST DAY AS OPPOSITION

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LEADER. WHERE WILSON WAS VINDICTIVE AND SOMEWHAT PETTY, THATCHER WAS INCISIVE. THE ISSUE, SHE SAID, WAS WHETHER A GOVERNMENT WHOSE ECONOMIC POLICIES ARE OPPOSED BY SUBSTANTIAL PORTION OF ITS OWN PARTY COULD GOVERN, AND SHE RECEIVED NO REPLY. OVERWHELMING MAJORITY OF LABOR BACKBENCHERS SUPPORTED GOVERNMENT IN THEIR SPEECHES, FLAYING THEIR TRIBUNITE COLLEAGUES WHO SHOWED ANGER BUT NOT CONTRITION. LEFTISTS REPEATEDLY MADE POINT THAT WHILE THEY

WOULD VOTE FOR GOVERNMENT, THEIR VOTES SHOULD NOT BE CON-
STRUED AS SUPPORT FOR PROPOSED SPENDING CUTS. CHANCEL-
LOR HEALEY WOUND UP DEBATE. DEFENDING GOVERNMENT'S ECONO-
MIC STRATEGY AND ATTACKING DISSENTERS WITH EVEN GREATER
VENOM THAN WILSON.

3. ACTUAL OUTCOME, WHICH WAS NEVER REALLY IN DOUBT, WAS
SOMETHING OF ANTI-CLIMAX. TRIBUNITES DUTIFULLY TROOPED
THROUGH GOVERNMENT LOBBY WITH OTHER LABOR PARTY MEMBERS,
THE SINGLE SDLP MEMBER AND THE NORTHERN IRELAND INDEPEN-

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 02 OF 02 LONDON 03988

DENT, FRANK MAGUIRE. OPPOSITION PARTIES, WITH EXCEPTION OF SEVEN MEMBERS OF NORTHERN IRELAND UNIONIST COALITION (UUUC) WHO ABSTAINED, VOTED AGAINST GOVERNMENT, BUT FELL 17 VOTES SHORT.

5. COMMENT: IT WAS CLEAR FROM STATEMENTS OF PRIME MINISTER AND CHANCELLOR THAT GOVERNMENT WILL NOT MODIFY PROPOSED CUTS IN FUTURE SPENDING PROGRAMS IN ANY SIGNIFICANT WAY. POSSIBILITY OF SOME READJUSTMENTS WITHIN OVERALL TOTALS, HOWEVER, CANNOT BE ENTIRELY DISCOUNTED, THOUGH ANY SUCH CHANGES WOULD BE RESULT OF TUC RATHER THAN TRI-
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BUNE GROUP PRESSURES. AS TO TRIBUNE'S FUTURE BEHAVIOR, CHANCELLOR HEALEY MARCH 12 TOLD EMBOFFS THAT HE EXPECTS DISSIDENTS TO VOTE WITH GOVERNMENT ON FINANCE BILL IMPLEMENTING SPENDING CUTS.

6. EVENTS OF PAST TWO DAYS, ESPECIALLY WHEN TAKEN TOGETHER WITH OVERWHELMING CONSERVATIVE VICTORIES IN THE WIRRAL AND CARLSHALTON BY-ELECTIONS (SEPT), HAVE REVIVED SAGGING TORY SPIRITS -- INDEED, THE SURGE OF POLITICAL JUICES THROUGH PARTY'S VEINS IS ALMOST VISIBLE. THE GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN DAMAGED, AND CONSERVATIVE CONFIDENCE AT LEAST PARTIALLY RESTORED. SOME POLITICAL OBSERVERS, MOST NOTABLY THE "TIMES," ARE ALREADY SPECULATING ON A FALL ELECTION. FROM OUR VANTAGE POINT, HOWEVER, SUCH SUGGESTIONS ARE PREMATURE. WHILE THE GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN WOUNDED, THE END IS BY NO MEANS IN SIGHT.

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: VOTE OF CONFIDENCE, GOVERNMENT EXPENDITURES, ECONOMIC PROGRAMS, OPPOSITION PARTIES
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 12 MAR 1976
Decaption Date: 01 JAN 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: GolinoFR
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1976LONDON03988
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D760094-0654
From: LONDON
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1976/newtext/t19760367/aaaacgzh.tel
Line Count: 205
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION EUR
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 4
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: 76 LONDON 3842
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: GolinoFR
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 31 MAR 2004
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <31 MAR 2004 by MartinML>; APPROVED <01 APR 2004 by GolinoFR>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
04 MAY 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: GOVERNMENT WINS VOTE OF CONFIDENCE
TAGS: PGOV, PINT, UK
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 04 MAY 2006